

Framework for the National System of Marine Protected Areas

Overview

The past two decades have witnessed a dramatic increase in the use of marine protected areas (MPAs) as a conservation and management tool to protect the nation's most important ocean resources and areas. In response to this trend, Presidential Executive Order 13158 (May 26, 2000) directs the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National MPA Center (MPA Center) to work with the Department of the Interior and other agencies and stakeholders to develop a comprehensive plan for an effective, integrated National System of MPAs (National System). Since its inception in 2001, the MPA Center has been gathering the fundamental information needed to develop the National System in a way that will meet diverse conservation goals throughout U.S. waters by using the best available science and existing MPA authorities and programs.

Beginning in fiscal year 2005, the MPA Center will engage the nation in a participatory dialogue to develop the Framework for the National System, of which MPA recommendations and input from the MPA Federal Advisory Committee, agencies, authorities, and stakeholders are a cornerstone. The Framework will describe in straightforward terms the rationale, goals and components of the National System, and the processes for designing and implementing it based on sound science and broad stakeholder input. The following overview is a best estimate of the Framework's organization and content that will be modified based on input received. The MPA Center anticipates that a draft of the Framework will be published in the *Federal Register* for final public comment in early 2006.

Introduction

Rationale for the National System of MPAs: Summarizes the need for and benefits of the National System. Also outlines the mandate for the National System and describes its relationship to existing MPA authorities and programs.

Origin of the Draft Framework: Outlines the process through which the Framework was formulated, including the role of the FAC and its recommendations, a summary of stakeholder and agency participation, and the input of state and federal advisory groups.

II. Defining the National System

Common Language: Provides a summary of the MPA Center's Classification System for MPAs, which provides an objective set of terms to describe and understand the purpose and level of protection afforded by any MPA.

National System Goals, Components and MPA Criteria: Provides the substantive goals, objectives, and suite of MPA site types (i.e., components) of the National System. Also lists the specific definitional criteria for MPAs to be eligible for inclusion in the National System and on the resulting List of MPAs.

Guiding Principles: Outlines the core principles and approaches that will guide the development and implementation of the National System, including: clearly articulated goals and objectives; based on best available science; coordinated at all levels of government; informed by stakeholder input; and evaluated and adaptively managed.

III. Designing the National System

Three MPA Planning Tracks: Describes the three tracks – natural heritage, cultural heritage, and sustainable production – that will frame the collaborative regional level planning processes with partner agencies and programs to identify conservation and management priorities.

Identifying the Existing National System: Presents an overview of the process by which the goals, objectives, and criteria of the National System are applied to the inventory of existing marine managed areas to identify the suite of MPA sites eligible for the National System and resulting List of MPAs. Further describes the process for coordination across agencies and programs with authority over eligible MPA sites to bring them into the National System, develop the MPA List, and avoid harm to those resources from federal activities.

Identifying Regional Place-Based Conservation Priorities: Summarizes the key steps in the collaborative regional and national planning process for identifying gaps in protection and priorities for future MPA actions (i.e., new or enhanced sites) based on: a) an assessment of how existing sites selected for the National System collectively meet its goals; b) the levels of protection afforded by other existing place-based marine management efforts; c) the characterization of resources, habitats and ecosystems; and d) the evaluation of threats.

Identifying Options for Governance: Provides an overview and assessment of the existing MPA legal framework for designating and managing MPAs, identification of legal, policy and/or coordination options within and across governmental levels, and the process for determining National System governance.

The Integrated Plan for the Comprehensive National System: Outlines the Plan that will detail the integrated, comprehensive system of priority areas that collectively meet multiple conservation and management objectives. Further describes the process and science being developed to integrate multiple objectives in MPA design and balance competing and complementary objectives.

IV. Implementing and Maintaining the National System

Implementing the Comprehensive National System: Illustrates how existing programs and authorities can use the Plan to inform their priorities for new and enhanced MPAs. Also describes how evolving needs within the National System will be identified and addressed, and outlines principles for evaluating its effectiveness. Lastly, describes the resources required to maintain coordination of and revisions to the National System.

Building Capacity for Long-Term Stewardship and Adaptive Management: Describes the information, skills, tools, and processes needed to support long-term stewardship and identifies mechanisms for building and/or coordinating the necessary capacity among National System partner programs.